SOMERLEYTON PARISH COUNCIL

Defibrillator Working Group — Report to Parish Council

Meeting: Thursday 2nd July 2026

Background

The community defibrillator has been in place since 2020 and is sited to serve the approximately 300 residents of Somerleyton. Since installation, a team of 15 volunteers has supported it, all trained in basic life support and defibrillator use, with annual refresher training. The volunteer call-out system was provided by the Community Heartbeat Trust (CHT) under the name VETS (Volunteer Emergency Telephone Support System).

Annual Refresher Training — May 2026

The annual refresher training session was held in May 2026. The date had been chosen specifically to maximise volunteer availability. The session was also opened to the wider community and advertised on noticeboards and via the parish mailing list.

Nine of the fifteen volunteers attended. Of those present, two were NHS employees who complete equivalent training through their employer. The remaining volunteers present did not take the opportunity to practise chest compressions on the training dummies provided, despite a video presentation having been shown demonstrating the critical importance of effective CPR to patient survival.

Given that effective CPR is physically demanding and that there was no evidence that all volunteers could deliver it reliably — particularly in the absence of recent practice — the decision was taken that it was no longer safe or appropriate to present the VETS system as a dependable community resource.

There is also a structural problem with how the VETS line operates in practice. Where a resident is alone with a patient, calling the VETS line requires either interrupting CPR or ending the call with the 999 handler in order to dial out, since most residents will not have a second handset to hand. In other words, the existence of the line had the potential to cost a patient access to continuous CPR and call handler guidance at the point when both matter most.

Termination of the VETS Line

On 23rd May 2026, an urgent email was sent to the CHT contacts responsible for managing the VETS system, requesting immediate cancellation of the Somerleyton line and asking for confirmation of receipt. No response was received, and no auto-reply was in place to direct urgent enquiries elsewhere.

Given the potential for the active VETS line to cause harm — by leading the person with the patient to spend vital minutes waiting for a response that might not come — the decision was taken on 25th May to mark the defibrillator as inactive on the ambulance service database while awaiting a resolution. This did not deprive the community of access to a defibrillator, as the school also holds one within the village.

On 7th June a formal complaint was submitted via the CHT WebNos reporting system. This received no acknowledgement.

On 13th June, the CHT Secretary was contacted directly using an address from existing records. A prompt reply was received from Zoe Arrowsmith, who confirmed that the named contacts no longer worked for the charity, apologised for the lack of response, confirmed that the VETS line had been cancelled, and advised that a refund of the most recent payment would be arranged.

The defibrillator was returned to the active ambulance service register on 13th June 2026.

A formal complaint has been submitted to the Community Heartbeat Trust regarding the failure to respond to the original request to cancel the line, the lack of any acknowledgement of the WebNos complaint of 7th June, and the absence of any emergency fallback contact throughout this period. A written response, confirmation that the matter has been investigated, and confirmation that May's payment for the VETS line has been refunded have all been requested. This has been copied to the Parish Clerk

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Current Position

The defibrillator is fully operational and registered as active with the ambulance service. The VETS volunteer call-out line has been permanently stood down. All households will be informed by leaflet of the change and advised on the correct procedure in an emergency.

The volunteers have been invited to a meeting at Somerleyton Village Hall on Wednesday 8th July to be informed of the reasons for standing down the VETS line and to be thanked for their dedication to the community.

Future Training

The Parish Council may wish to consider whether to offer a community CPR and defibrillator awareness session, subject to sufficient interest being expressed by residents. This would be open to all parishioners rather than constituting a volunteer commitment. Given previous experience of community engagement with such events, the Council should be realistic about likely attendance before committing to arrangements.

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